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Dragons find new pals in Arizona elementary school

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CAMP TAJI, Iraq – In times of war, sometimes the best gift a Soldier can receive is a piece of mail. For one group of Soldiers in the Combat Aviation Brigade's 1st Battalion, 4th Aviation Regiment, they received much more from a Phoenix, Ariz., elementary school.

Sgt. 1st Class Enos Brathwaite, S-6 noncommissioned officer in charge, submitted his name to the popular site, AnySoldier.com. What he received in return was a lasting relationship with a class full of sixth-grade students, who were more than willing to respond.

“Basically what I put in the ad was really not for me but more for the Soldiers,” Brathwaite said. “It was really for my platoon, and the students replied and they went out of the way to get us stuff. They sent us two packages with different things in them.”

The students from Ms. Willie Munoz' sixth grade class at Washington Elementary School, responded by sending the Soldiers boxes filled with letters and Valentine's Day cards that proved to be morale boosters for the troops.

Munoz also enclosed a card that read, "Dear Sgt. Brathwaite ... We chose your unit because of what you wrote on AnySoldier.Com. You didn't ask for PlayStations, DVDs or Microwaves. You asked for mail for your Soldiers. You didn't ask for yourself, you asked for them."

Munoz also added, "When I told my students about you and what you wrote, they started bringing in food and other items for the care package. Each student also brought in \$1, so we could purchase one UnderArmor Shirt. Please give that shirt to someone who could use a pick-me-up. Please tell that Soldier that 30 kids cared about him or her."

Brathwaite said the teacher also explained in the card that her class of 30 students consisted of mostly under-privileged kids who were forced to deal with a lot of "grown-up" issues that inner-city kids in today's society often deal with.

"They have a plethora of stuff to deal with away from school," Munoz said in an additional e-mail message to Brathwaite. "A parent in prison, a father who passed away this summer due to AIDS, financial worries, caring for younger siblings after school, apartment evictions and so forth."

She explained that she only mentioned these issues to give the Soldiers a better picture of who the students are.

"I only write this to tell you that these kids are extremely resilient and to be able to deal with all those adult problems at such a young age and still come to school with a

smile on their faces,” she said in the message. “That tells you something about these kids at Washington Elementary.”

Brathwaite said he was touched by her statement and he quickly got the ball rolling to respond.

“We found out that the kids were not as fortunate as most of the kids in the area and they went out of their way to do something for us, so in return, we wanted to do something for them,” he said. “We’ve written them back and we’ve called and spoke to them in the classroom over the intercom system.”

Brathwaite said his Soldiers got together and collectively decided to do something for the students as a show of gratitude.

“We decided to do something to make sure that everyone gets something, for what they did for us,” Brathwaite said. “We pulled together and everyone pitched in and got them T-shirts.

Staff Sgt. Andreal Washington, who also works along with Brathwaite, said she agrees that giving back to the school kids is a great gesture. “That let’s them know someone cares about them as well,” she said.

“I think it’s great,” she said. “For us it’s a real morale booster because they sent up packages and each of the students sent us little Valentine’s Day cards, they all wrote little notes, and we were just so touched by what they did for us. We felt like we had to do something in return.”

Washington said at least 20 more Soldiers from the battalion’s Headquarters and Headquarters Company have gotten involved in the correspondence with the students and they’ve even playfully adopted the school as their own.

“Tomorrow, we’re actually going to send the other thing we have for them,” she explained. “Everybody donated money. We’re sending it to the class so they can take a field trip or whatever they want to do with it.”

According to Spc. Jason Hines, striking a relationship with the students has been rewarding for him, as well. He said not only was it a morale booster, but it also reinforced the fact that someone back home really cares about what the Soldiers in Iraq are doing.

“It was a big thing because most of them come from financially unstable backgrounds, and now that we’ve corresponded with them, most of them want to be Soldiers,” Hines said.

Brathwaite also gave his explanation of why touching the lives of the young people is important, especially for Soldiers serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“A lot of times, we lose focus of what is important,” he said. “The future is important. If we don’t show these younger kids that it’s okay to be a Soldier, after they watch all the negative publicity on TV, they will never want to become Soldiers. Then we will lose our independence and our freedom that we worked so hard for.”

Capt. Byron Needham, commander, HHC, said he’s pleased with his Soldiers effort in keeping a line of communication open with the students.

“It’s good for them, and it’s good for these Soldiers over here,” he said. “It takes our minds off what we have going on here daily – and it also gives those children something to look up to.”